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The strategic turn in post-Marxist Discourse Theory

Alan Williams tweeted a few years ago that for having a book entitled *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (HSS) as magnum opus, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe had remarkably little to say about political strategy. Indeed, while the concept of strategy features regularly in HSS, it is not crucial to understanding the book's central argument. It remains equally low-key in their later work, and is all but absent in most of the secondary literature in post-Marxist Discourse Theory published in the quarter-century post-HSS.

Yet recently, something resembling a strategic turn can be discerned within Discourse Theory (DT). In Germany, Martin Nonhoff started working on a rigorous theorization of strategy that fits within DT's ontology. Eva Herschinger reappraised the notion for the first-time for an Anglophone audience. The hugely influential *Inventing the Future* by Srnicek and Williams placed strategic reflection about how progressives win at politics in the 21st century at the centre of its argument. And to make the circle full, Chantal Mouffe's most recent work, *For a Left-Wing Populism*, wonders what kind of political strategy the Left needs to pursue in order to successfully implement its progressive projects.

The roots of this emerging strategic turn in post-Marxist Discourse Theory lie at least partially beyond academia, with radical political parties like *Podemos* and *Syriza* that drew inspiration from Laclau and Mouffe. The realization that their abstract insights and theories about the Political could be successfully mobilized for small-p parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics, undoubtedly motivated discourse-theorists to take a closer look at how they could study, analyse, and understand tangible political strategies.

But more academic developments certainly played a role too in the triggering of this strategic turn. About fifteen years ago, thinkers like Lash, Beasley-Murray, Arditi started to challenge the poststructuralist interpretation of hegemony in a rigorous fashion. The ensuing intellectual debate was far more sophisticated than the rather virulent spat between the post-Marxists and Marxists like Geras, Wood, and Mouzelis in the early nineties. Favouring a paradigm they called 'posthegemony', Beasley-Murray and his companions argued that the post-Marxist take on hegemony does not suffice to salvage the concept, and wager it is time for the contemporary Left to develop non-hegemonic strategies by embracing networked, viral, rhizomatic, and exodus politics.

The posthegemonic critique of Laclau and Mouffe definitely has flaws, but it also offers one of the clearest and most incisive formulations of a crucial problem plaguing post-Marxist Discourse Theory: it is ambivalent about whether hegemony is an ontic or an ontological category.

oing politics, that arose from the 'Democratic Revolution of Modernity' at the end of the 18tn century. The possibility for hegemonic politics came into being together with modern liberal democracy, and the two are closely intertwined. As such, a progressive project that promotes hegemonic politics must also promote the liberal-democratic heritage, and engage in the furthering, and deepening of its core values – *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Laclau and Mouffe call this project 'radical democracy'. Yet contrary to this ontic interpretation of hegemony, Laclau has also presented hegemony as an ontological category. He claims that every social practice has a hegemonic dimension and that all meaning is ultimately hegemonically constructed, and that all politics is therefore hegemonic. This formulation presents hegemony as a timeless, space-less, universal category – hegemony encompasses the Political.

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Posthegemony theorists have for definitively confirmed the lingering sentiment that these two accounts are fundamentally incompatible. Yet they usually proceed by reducing DT to the ontic dimension. If hegemonic politics is merely one form of politics, it can be argued that it was never or is no longer a viable approach, and that an alternative posthegemonic politics through networks, autonomous zones, and exodus, constitutes the future of the left. However, a different reaction to this internal contradiction in DT, could be to embrace the ontological dimension of hegemony. This implies abandoning the idea of an innate link between democracy and hegemony, and instead framing DT as a metalanguage for understanding politics as such. In this vein, the result of the poststructuralist turn in hegemony theory is not a normative project like radical democracy, but instead a framework for describing and explaining the effects of political interventions. Obviously, in such an interpretation, strategy all of a sudden becomes a key concept.

Some of the first scholars to recognize DT's potential for strategic analysis were oddly enough rather critical of Laclau and Mouffe. Boucher and Critchley for instance, both pointed out that an internally fully coherent elaboration of DT's main principles results in a rather Machiavellistic theory about how power is contested and maintained, devoid of any normative or ethical considerations. The growing number of far-right groups bastardizing Gramsci's ideas, lends credence to this hypothesis. Yet whereas Boucher and Critchley perceived this normative deficit negatively, the strategic turn in DT embraces the potential of hegemony as an ontological category and seizes it to analyse the outcomes and results of political projects, regardless of their goals.

A discourse-theoretical perspective thus alerts us to the ideological dimensions of strategy. It reveals that political strategy is not just about what about the schemes of spin doctors, politicians, and movement leaders, but that it also involves a structural and intersubjective component. A political strategy always constitutes an articulation into an order of discourse, and hence, its effects, its chances of success, and its political consequences can be discursively analysed. Every articulation, no matter whether it is inspired by the idea of a posthegemonic exodus, an explicitly counterhegemonic move, or just an isolated demand, affects the balance of forces at the hegemonic level, and DT equips us to study precisely how it will do so.

This strategic turn pushes DT into a completely new and unexplored corner of the pantheon of critical theory. Questioning when and why particular political moves (fail to) work, and thinking through the "adaptability" of the left-wing project so that it may actually be implemented, constitutes an entirely novel form of critique. Some might argue that it in fact does not constitute critique anymore at all, since this guise of DT has abandoned the normative ground from which it can be claimed something is bad or wrong. Yet if studying how progressive social change can be effected is a valuable and worthwhile endeavour in its own right, this relinquishing of normative ground does not mean DT has to lose its critical edge. Instead, such a move creates a clear division of labour between critical theories explaining the roots and oppressive effects of power, and DT as concerned with the ideological dynamics of the exercise of power.

About the author

Thomas Jacobs is a PhD candidate at the Centre for EU Studies, Ghent University. His main research interests include EU trade policy, international political economy, and political communication. Most of Thomas' work focuses on discourse, meaning-making, signification, and strategy in political praxis, departing from a poststructuralist perspective, more specifically the discourse-theoretical tradition of Laclau and Mouffe. Prior to entering academia, he worked as a consultant at a Brussels-based communications and public affairs firm.

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